

**THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY
SPRING COMMENCEMENT SPEECH – JUNE 14, 2009
BY SENATOR JOHN GLENN**

Usually, commencement speakers are selected for their well respected intelligence, advanced education, exceptional judgment, academic credentials, a long record of publishing well-researched articles in notable journals, or at least in part because they are just older. Great. One out of six – “older” – not bad!

Commencement speeches are often “feel good” exercises about a “glowing future” and a “brighter tomorrow.” With your efforts, I have no doubt these will come. I would like to make three basic observations or expressions that I hope may help speed you toward that great future.

First. I hope this class – your class – of 2009 becomes the greatest "Why Not?" class of all time. What do I mean by "Why Not?" It was expressed well by Nobel Laureate George Bernard Shaw. He wrote:

"Some men see things as they are and ask, 'Why?'

I dream of things that never were and ask, 'Why Not?'"

These two words describe an attitude of curiosity and of action. In whatever field your interest may lie, “Why Not?” inspires you to look into the unknown, into the as yet untried, to search for possible improvements. This attitude of curiosity can move you ahead as an individual, and all of us ahead as a nation.

Since cavemen first ventured forth, all human progress – every bit – began with someone, an individual, not a group, not a council or a committee, nor a consortium, but one person just like you who was curious and had an idea of how to do something in a new way, a different way,

a better way. That someone made change possible. Facing both daunting problems and boundless opportunities, it is your time to ask "Why Not?"

Has it worked? Let's look at communications.

In my teen years in New Concord, Ohio, I had a serious and abiding interest in Annie Castor. We were "steadies." When I called her on the telephone from my home, I went to the large box on the wall in the hallway, held a receiver to my ear, turned a crank on the side of the box to generate a signal to the operator who asked, "Number, please?" I responded, "3134." That's a number I will never forget! The operator rang the proper code of short and long rings to identify which phone of the five or six on Annie's "party line" was to answer. When we were on the phone we had to be careful because other people might listen in on the shared line.

The crank phone was the most modern equipment available. Long-distance calls of any major distance had to be scheduled in advance with the operator. Years later, New Concord was moving into the "big time" when dial phones were installed.

Fast forward with me to just a few months ago. My cell phone rang and a voice said "John and Annie, this is Scott from outer space" – and there was a laugh, but it was no joke. Our good friend, Scott Parazynski, a crew mate of mine from my last space flight in 1998, was in space on another mission to repair the International Space Station. You may remember seeing pictures of him on the longest space-walk ever made during the repair mission. Scott and the crew were packing up to return home the next day. He had a few minutes to talk so he called us.

There Scott was, traveling at an orbital speed of 17,500 miles per hour (that is almost five miles per second), at 250 miles altitude, half way around the earth, his radio signal going first to the TDRS (Technical Data Relay Satellite), then to Houston, to landlines, to cell phone channels,

to my cell phone, and the sound was more clear than "3134" was many years ago when I spoke with Annie just a half mile away.

Think of the thousands, yes millions, of "Why Not?" moments, the curiosity, the decisions that came together through the years, bit by bit, to make Scott's call from space possible.

Now, with cell phones and texting, blogging, My Space, Craig's List, Facebook, YouTube, iPods, iPhones, Blackberrys, Twitters, Tweepers . . . where are we headed and what are the "Why Not?" possibilities – and problems – of these new technologies?

What about transportation and our "Why Not?" question?

With orders to the West Coast during the early days of World War II, my first airline flight across the United States by the most direct route available went from Columbus to Indianapolis to St. Louis, Kansas City, Oklahoma City, Albuquerque, Los Angeles and finally, to San Francisco. The flight took almost 24 hours. Today, five hours, plus or minus, will take you coast-to-coast. And now, Scott, in the space shuttle, was going around the earth in about 90 minutes and could enjoy either a sunset or sunrise every 45 minutes.

What about medical "Why Nots?"

You may know the story of Sir Alexander Fleming's curiosity about mold in a petri dish; plain, old, gray, gooey mold like you might see on week-old garbage? He was curious about the mold patterns and from this moment of curiosity penicillin was discovered. He revolutionized medicine and dramatically increased the probability that you will live a longer and healthier life.

Living healthy lives is meaningful to each of us, but we also strive to live enjoyable, fulfilling, even "happy" lives. The happiest people I have known, the most vibrant,

alive, productive people, are the ones with the biggest doses of curiosity, the real practitioners of "Why Not?" An inquisitive mind becomes a way of life.

The satisfying life I wish for you has a second element. No person lives solely as an island unto himself, particularly in a democracy such as ours. Those whose world is centered just on themselves live in a very small universe. We are fulfilled when we are part of something bigger than ourselves; when we dedicate ourselves to a purpose, a cause, a mutual effort, be it in a church, a synagogue or a mosque; whether we choose civic service, military, public or community service, or just help out where we see the need. Being involved in the larger community enriches us as individuals.

Let me illustrate my third observation.

Our School of Public Affairs presents an annual award for Excellence in Public Service and this year's award was presented to U.S. Senator Tom Carper of Delaware. He exemplifies the motto of our School: "Inspire Citizenship/Develop Leadership." Tom is a graduate of The Ohio State University via a ROTC scholarship; served in the Navy; became a Captain in the Naval Reserve; had an exemplary public career serving in several state offices, two terms as Governor; head of the National Governors' Association; and now serves with great distinction in the United States Senate.

In Tom's acceptance remarks for the award, he told of receiving a letter from a student requesting his opinion of the greatest factor in "happiness." He had never been asked a direct question about "happiness." He thought about things such as money, prestige, etc., but then realized what had given him the most satisfaction and happiness in his life. He answered the letter with only two words written in the center of the page –

"Serve others."

I share Senator Carper's belief – “serving others” through public or private action can benefit two ways, as Edwin Markham’s short poem says.

“There is a destiny that makes us brothers

None goes his way alone.

What we send into the lives of others

Comes back into our own.”

I hope these observations may be useful and help you along the way:

- 1) Incomparable curiosity: “Dream of things that never were and ask, Why Not?”
- 2) Commit to something greater than yourself
- 3) Serve others

Today is a very special day, the day of your commencement; but, being June 14, it is also National Flag Day. Who was not moved by the “presentation of the colors” as we started today’s ceremony, the hoisting of the flag by the ROTC students – some of whom may well be representing our country in harm’s way not long after commencement – and seeing that flag catch the breeze and unfurl – that’s nearly a magical moment.

Beautiful as that waving red, white, and blue piece of cloth may be, it is what it stands for, what it symbolizes on this Flag Day that stirs our feelings, our allegiance, and our willingness to support the greater cause it represents, even at personal risk.

We sometimes run through the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag very rapidly, maybe even thinking of other things as we say the words. But at the end come six words we should remember every day of our lives – “with liberty and justice for all.”

Throughout the short history of our country, we have made great strides toward providing the “liberty” of opportunity, and the “justice” of “equality” we recite in the Pledge of Allegiance,

but we all know there is still a long way to go to make these hopes into reality for everyone. It's up to you to keep the march going, both for our own people and as a beacon of hope, and example to the world, of what can be.

We come together in this great stadium – the "Shoe" - with many memories: the band, script Ohio and the dotting of the "i"; the roar of "OH-IO." In this stadium, we remember the excellence of the teams and outstanding individual performances. Now you, just like the OSU teams, will represent The Ohio State University.

To you, Class of 2009, make yourselves proud! Go for It, Godspeed, and to each and every one of you, Go Bucks!